



Ken Grant's Liverpool Lullaby

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BREAKING COVER

Ken Grant used to have a quote on his enlarger from Josef Sudick that stated, "Rush slowly." It's been something of a mantra for the photographer who, over the course of 20-odd years, has worked ceaselessly, without ever feeling compelled to shout about his work. Now his time has come, says former pupil Colin Pantall

I was in Ken Grant's MA class when he was teaching documentary photography at University of Wales, Newport. You'd bring out an unsold mass of pictures and Grant would start talking in his mellifluous poet's voice, his thoughts weaving in and out of the pictures, connecting music, literature and photographers to them. He touched on places where life shone, where soul came through, and left the rest alone. It was never about you, or the images, but about the wider world, the quiet moments, what you might do, and what you could do.

The same poetic thoughtfulness infuses Grant's photography, much of which is based around his hometown, Liverpool. It is work that, through acclaimed shows at the Format Festival in 2003, and the publication of two books last year, *No Pain Whatsoever* and *Rock*, has brought Grant fresh recognition. It's richly deserved. Grant has been photographing for more than 30 years and has passed through the nine circles of photography hell. His career has never been easy, but he has always been committed to the people and places he has photographed.

"I was young when I started photographing," says Grant. "I worked for my father as a joiner in the holidays. When I was 12 or 13 I used the money to buy a Polaroid camera. It meant that I had eight pictures for the summer. I was square and I had to make a choice about what pictures to make. My father worked refitting shops for months at a time and he got a lot of unskilled labour in to help him. I met a lot of people that way, people who were transient and passing through. It wasn't intimate but it was intense, meeting with people who had conversations about how they lived their lives. I was privileged to be there, a quiet presence in the room, the tea lad who would listen to the conversations about money and family and football."

Grant absorbed these stories from the adult world and slowly they emerged in a photography that shows how people live, but also how they think and rest. It's neither simplistic nor romantic, but rather holistic, as informed by

the bleak short stories of Raymond Carver, Richard Yates and Flannery O'Connor as it is by the Scandinavian black-and-white tradition. "I started to realise there are a lot of these quiet activities that are unspoken or unheard of, that are neglected in photography or writing," Grant says. "But then you'd have people talking about how they kill time in a heavily industrialised environment, about going over the wall on a Friday afternoon... You'd have the official version of life, but then you'd have the unofficial take, where all these quiet moments came through. That's the version that I photograph."

Near and far

Grant draws an analogy between the quietness of his pictures and the ebb and flow of the river made in Liverpool – seasonal work that rose and fell with the tides that brought the ships to dock. There's a slow rhythm to his work that he finds a parallel in writers such as Alexander Gray, James Kelman and Erik Voss, authors who talk about the vulnerabilities of people who work in mundane jobs with low pay but, through a combination of spirit and will, manage to survive.

As Grant photographed 1980s Liverpool, he also began doing editorial work with overseas journalists on assignment in the region. He soon found photography opening up to him. "I did a lot of work for liberation," he says. "They used photography in a very forthright way. Their journalists would come over to do a story, but sometimes the brief was open and they'd say to me, 'What's the story, what can we photograph?' We'd end up doing something I was interested in. So we'd both get a story out of it, but I'd also get something that would have a longer life."

"Some of the things I photographed were much more warmly received abroad," he adds. "I'd go and photograph the dock workers every two weeks, but the pictures were only published in France. If I'd been waiting for newspapers and magazines to commission something, I'd never have done half the work I did."

Grant traces his ability to get out and

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Unlabeled (Clayton Clark, Thompson Lane), from the book *Clayton Clark*, 1988. Photo by Ken Grant.



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(Left) Brothers outside the shop, working Liverpool, 1988. From *The Close Season*, 2010. (Top right) Family Christmas, North Wales, Liverpool, 1989. (Bottom right) Add the Day, Liverpool, Liverpool, 1991. All images from the book *The Close Season*, 2010.

(Overleaf) Unlabeled (Paula's Family), from *Rock*, 2014.

photography, to make work in "little pockets of activity" back to his apprenticeship in image-making while training as a technician in the Wirral. "I'd go to the library and I'd find things like Lee Friedlander books, and wondered how they ended up in this library on the Wirral," he says. "Then I found Tom Wood, who was teaching there, and Tom would add this dimension of the importance of how to make work, how to keep going and how to find ways of doing things as cheaply as possible. So at that point it was also about getting a group together to buy film in bulk, or finding the cheapest possible out-of-date film."

As Grant's photographic investment gathered pace, so did his pragmatism – he got by with teaching, training, running workshops, assisting image-makers such as Marketa Lukackova, who is better known as a photographic artist than a commercial photographer, and doing "work that had nothing to do with photography," he says. "I did everything. It sticks people that I still know how to hang a door, but that allowed me to keep on working in photography. It's all these little jagged pieces of how to make a living from photography. I used to have a Josef Sudick quote on my enlarger: 'Rush slowly.' In said: And that's what I've been doing."

Life became less complicated when he began teaching on a more permanent basis – he worked part-time for a long time, up until around 12 years ago. "The advantage was that you could be quite stable with what was coming in, but you could be flexible enough to still do long-term residences," says Grant, who currently works at the University of Ulster in Belfast following a 10-year career at the University of Wales, Newport, where he rose from part-timer to course leader.

"So I'd have access to a place for half a week or a summer and could continue with photography. Full-time is different – when things are going well, you have to be pragmatic about how you use your time. Josef Koudelka used to work in the summer and then do his printing in the autumn and winter, but if there are too many responsibilities, or things don't go well, then duties stack up and making photography becomes impossible. If you work full-time, you can see people become institutionalised, they can get comfortable and not make that much work. You have to keep moving to keep making work."

Fortunately for Grant, he's also found teaching inspiring, both in terms of the students he teaches and the encouragement he receives from his colleagues. "I want that constant with telling me I needed to do something with it made a difference," he says. "In Ulster I'm sharing an office with Donavan Wylie, so in the office we talk about photography and what works and what doesn't. When we're out on a lunch break we are doing the same, so we're talking about pictures

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